



# CORDOBA WORKSHOPS REPORTS

## Peace Promotion Workshop for Religious, Traditional and Civil Society Actors

---

Nouakchott, December 2014

*Author* | **Lakhdar Ghetas**  
Cordoba Foundation of Geneva

© The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, 2016

Fondation Cordoue de Genève  
Case postale 360  
CH -1211 Genève 19  
Tél: +41 (0) 22 734 15 03  
Fax: +41 (0) 22 734 10 34  
info@cordoue.ch  
www.cordoue.ch

Peace Promotion Workshop for Religious, Traditional and Civil Society Actors

Nouakchott, Mauritania  
December 2014

**Author:** Lakhdar Ghetta

**Layout and front cover design:** Amine Lakhdar

This report can be accessed online at [www.cordoue.ch](http://www.cordoue.ch)

Any opinions expressed in this report present the views of the contributors alone, and not necessarily those of their respective institutions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This second edition of the Peace Promotion Workshop series was in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on 8-12 December 2014, within the framework of its North Africa and West Asia in Transformation programme (NAWAT).<sup>1</sup> This workshop convened 24 participants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sahel regions. It aimed at consolidating the network and expanding it to participants from a non-religious background, to include traditional community and tribal leaders, civil society activists, women issues female leaders, and minority ethnic groups. Participants engaged in rich exchange of experiences and formulated concrete initiatives for peace promotion. The themes of the workshop were therefore diverse and ranged from the intersection of humanitarian action with peace mediation, to the role of traditional leaders in promoting peace in conflicts arising from ethnic, linguistic, or tribal tensions. Prevention of violent extremism thorough political participation and other means was also one of the focuses of the workshop. The workshop also explored opportunities for partnership between Muslim and Western peace promotion actors.

Over six sessions featuring participants with diverse backgrounds (Amazigh, Tuareg, Muslim, Christian, women, Salafi, humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), traditional leaders, religious scholars, and political affairs analysts) the workshop offered opportunities for a rich exchange and sharing of experiences. It also contributed to a deep understanding of the dynamics of conflicts in the region and avenues for peace promotion initiatives. Participants praised the diversified content of the workshop and quality of participants. The session on Mali was of particular interest to all participants because it allowed voices and first-hand insights from people that are very rarely (or never) hear in such fora. Participants identified five areas of action on issues ranging from peace mediation in humanitarian work, to ethnic tensions in Morocco and Mali, and countering violent extremism.

The main concrete results and recommendations of the workshop were as follows:

1. Humanitarian organizations dialogue: Three humanitarian organisations agreed to coordinate, with the aim of promoting peace through cooperation of NGOs and humanitarian action.
2. Amazigh-Islamist dialogue in Morocco: Participants representing Islamist groups and Amazigh NGOs agreed to hold a dialogue space in order to lessen polarization in the public sphere between the Amazigh and Islamists.
3. Inter-community dialogue in Mali: Malian participants acknowledged the need for an inter-community dialogue in order to promote peace on a durable basis.
4. Action research on Boko Haram: in order to fully understand the phenomenon and cover lines of tension (Christian/Muslim; North/South etc.) participants agreed there is a need for an expert to conduct an action research paper on religiously inspired armed groups in the Sahel.
5. Salafi scholars are willing to engage in doctrinal discussions focusing on countering the discourse of violence. This pedagogic work requires producing research, a seminar, and publications. For such an endeavor to have an impact among violent religiously extremist groups the scholars should be fully independent and locally sponsored.

---

<sup>1</sup> The first edition of this PPW series was held in Montreux 2013. It was implemented within the framework of NAWAT, by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the Religion/Politics/Conflict (RPC) of the Human Security Division (HSD) of the Swiss Federal Department of Federal Affairs (FDFA). North Africa and West Asia in Transformation (NAWAT) is a program of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva that seeks to develop collectively shared understanding and conflict transformation initiatives. It focuses on the dynamics that arise at the crossroads of social, political and religious processes, primarily in North Africa and the Middle East and/or involving Muslims in the West.

## CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	3
I. INTRODUCTION .....	5
II. ARTICULATION OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION.....	6
SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND MEDIATION .....	8
III. INTER-COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN MALI .....	9
IV. THE BOKO HARAM QUESTION .....	10
SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON THE BOKO HARAM GROUP.....	11
V. PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE: THE 2010 PRISON DIALOGUE INITIATIVE IN MAURITANIA .....	12
VI. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHABITATION IN THE REGION .....	13
SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHABITATION.....	15
VII. PARTNERSHIPS AND SYNERGY BETWEEN MUSLIM AND WESTERN PEACE ACTORS.....	15
VIII. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE AND THE DOCTRINAL ARGUMENTS FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION.....	16
IX. OUTCOMES / RESULTS .....	18
X. NEXT STEPS.....	18

## I. INTRODUCTION

Following the 2011 political upheaval in the MENA region, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) organised a series of workshops on the promotion of constructive political participation involving religiously inspired actors: Tunis, September 2012; Istanbul, March 2013; Istanbul, October 2014. This was conducted within the framework of the NAWAT program (North Africa and West Asia in Transformation), in partnership with the Religion/Politics/Conflict (RPC) of the Human Security Division (HSD) of the Swiss Federal Department of Federal Affairs (FDFA).<sup>2</sup>

During those meetings participants demonstrated how their groups and networks could be put to the service of peace promotion in the MENA and Sahel regions. Consequently, the CFG launched the project "Peace Promotion Workshop for Religiously Inspired Political Actors". This project aims to equip the participants with the basics of conflict analysis, approaches and tools for conflict transformation, and to provide a space for exchange between the participants and experts in order to discuss tensions in different contexts and work together to explore possible peace mediation initiatives. This project is underpinned by the assumption that by supporting religiously inspired political actors and their cross-regional preaching and charity networks in becoming peace brokers, stability has more chance of being sustainable. The rationale of this project is that the local and religious legitimacy and points of entry the faith-inspired political parties and groups enjoy through their charity and preaching

networks built over decades, as well as the willingness/readiness of many of them for peace action, all offer a unique opportunity to promote peace and mediation initiatives in the region.

A first edition of the PPW was held in Montreux (Switzerland), on 16-17 September 2013. A two-day workshop with 18 participants from across the Islamic faith-based, preaching and charity work spectrum, stretching geographically over seven Arab countries and two countries in the Sahel, provided definitions and an overview of approaches for conflict analysis and transformation. It also provided space for discussions and sharing of experiences on opportunities, as well as the identification of resources and possible entry points for peace promotion initiatives.<sup>3</sup> Based on the recommendations of the Montreux 2013 PPW, as well as the small group activities on peace promotion at the third edition of the political participation workshop in Istanbul in October 2014, a second edition of the PPW was held in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on 8-12 December 2014. This second edition convened 25 participants from the MENA and the Sahel regions. It aimed at consolidating the network and expanding it to participants from a non-religious background, to include traditional community and tribal leaders, civil society activists, female leaders on women's issues, and minority ethnic groups. The themes of the workshop were therefore diverse and ranged from the intersection of humanitarian action with peace mediation, to the role of traditional leaders in promoting peace in conflicts arising from ethnic, linguistic, or tribal tensions. Prevention of

---

<sup>2</sup> For details about NAWAT see <http://cordoue.ch/nawat>

---

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Montreux peace promotion workshop is available here: <http://cordoue.ch/publications/papers-a-reports/item/328-workshop-report-montreux-september-2013>

violent extremism through political participation and other means was also one of the foci of the workshop. The workshop explored also opportunities for partnership between Muslim and Western peace promotion actors.

## II. ARTICULATION OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The intersection of humanitarian action and conflict transformation in the MENA and Sahel regions has become a pressing issue, which has imposed itself on the agenda of both actors in the humanitarian field and organisations focused on peace promotion. The increase in the scope, intensity, complexity, and duration of the conflicts in the MENA and Sahel regions since 2011 has brought humanitarian organisations and peace promotion actors to review the efficiency of their interventions in terms of the impact and sustainability of their respective projects. Representatives of key humanitarian organizations that are involved in the MENA and Sahel regions shared their experiences and the limits they felt in a new context characterised by a surge in violent conflicts. Participants representing various humanitarian organisations presented different diagnoses as to the reasons behind the existing gap between humanitarian action and the inclusion of conflict transformation as a key element in the overall humanitarian action strategy. A representative of a major Gulf humanitarian NGO explained that a quick look at recent statistics show that 70-80% of world conflicts are found in the Muslim world, and that 70% of world's refugees are in the same region. Despite this situation, the vast majority of Islamic charity groups and NGOs are limited to preaching and humanitarian work only, and do not address conflict transformation in their

projects and strategy. For this same participant from the Gulf, that reality is due to subjective, structural, and geopolitical reasons: the fact is that most Islamic humanitarian NGOs have not developed their structures and mechanisms and have remained restricted to traditional charity action such as caring for orphans, building schools, health centers and digging water wells.

Another reason is their limited expertise in the field of conflict transformation. Besides, those NGOs are in a way the result of ruling regimes in the region that do not necessarily recognize the role of civil society. A Mauritanian participant, who explained how the work of his organization was limited by changing legislation, stressed the issue of government legislation with regard to the action and mandate of faith-based humanitarian NGOs. A Moroccan scholar stated that some regimes in the region ban religiously inspired humanitarian actors from playing a role in peace promotion. They think that the entry of faith-based charity NGOs into the realm of conflict transformation might upset the political equilibrium in the country.

A third obstacle confronting faith-based organizations in the MENA and Sahel regions is the issue of unhealthy competition among the different humanitarian groups with diverse religious doctrinal affiliations (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi, Sufi, Catholic, Protestant, etc.). A Yemeni participant explained that faith-based humanitarian NGOs sometimes become themselves tension spots because the large majority of these organizations were "set up in the spirit of competition and not complementarity. Besides, they were founded on self-centric outlook, with regard to their vision, goals, and mission." The sum result of these two aspects, explained the Yemeni participant, led

to a performance that is less humanitarian in that some faith-based humanitarian NGOs discriminate in the delivery of their services, i.e. serving constituencies that support their religious doctrinal affiliations rather than serving all the needy as human beings in need. A Mauritanian expert in Sahelian affairs supported the Yemeni participant's opinion and added that the fact that humanitarian action is dominated by the Salafi current necessarily puts more responsibility on them to diversify their action and reach out to other actors, in order to establish sustainable cooperation and narrow the gap between humanitarian action and peace promotion. On this point, another Mauritanian scholar enumerated a number of verses from the Quran that show that any charity work should be inclusive and non-discriminatory. He then explained that in the Quran, mediating between two parties goes hand in hand with peace and stability. The scholar recited verses where providing basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) is often mentioned with along with security. For him, this shows that peace promotion is at the heart of humanitarian work, for peace provides the foundation for any humanitarian and development action. Another Mauritanian Sahel expert stressed this opinion and added that Islamic charity groups have the asset of credibility, which they should put in the service of mediating local social tensions. By doing so, they will pave the way for other political actors to follow up the peace promotion effort at another level (political leadership, military, etc.) in order to resolve the bigger violent conflicts.

A peace expert shed light on the other side of the coin and explained that while competition among humanitarian groups is hampering peace promotion efforts in the region, the same could be said about competition among mediators and its impact on the effectiveness of peace. Inclusiveness

and cooperation are safeguards to prevent polarization in politics from affecting humanitarian action of NGOs of different affiliations. For all this, the integration of conflict transformation skills in humanitarian action is more than ever necessary and urgent. An expert on Malian affairs shared lessons learned from the ongoing Malian crisis with regard to the impact of political polarization on humanitarian action, and by consequence on the dynamics of the conflict. For this expert, the concentration of international aid in the south rather than in the north - where the need is more acute - has induced the negative perception that international humanitarian actors are taking sides. Another example was the decision of some humanitarian NGOs to leave Kidal after armed groups took control and the United Nations (UN) mission left. The expert in Malian affairs believes that decision of the international NGOs had a negative impact on the local social conditions and the overall dynamics of the polarization between Bamako and the north.

The discussion then turned to the issue of the interaction between Islamic humanitarian NGOs and Western organizations on the ground in the region. Tension between the Islamic and Western humanitarian organizations necessarily hampers any chances for cooperation in the field. The intensity of the conflicts in the MENA and Sahel regions, especially in the last three years, has introduced new challenges to both groups. In addition to the existing mutual suspicion, the Islamic and Western humanitarian actors now face a new reality that even increased financial resources could not address. The 2011 uprisings and the ongoing conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and the spill over in the Sahel region to countries such as Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, have confronted humanitarian actors with the issue of access, acceptability and credibility



within a violent and fluid context. An American participant explained that Christian humanitarian organizations have experienced the same challenges as those mentioned above by representatives of Islamic humanitarian NGOs. He explained that part of the suspicion is due to the fact that some western faith-based NGOs hide their faith identity because it hampers their chances to find funding from donors or the UN. This contributes, he added, to the duplication of efforts because NGOs do not disclose their funders. A British representative of a large faith-based humanitarian organization picked up on the issue and explained that suspicion could be defused by relying on local staff in the design, running and implementation of projects. The British participant added, "Solutions need be home-grown locally: that has been our experience over decades of work in the Sahel with fully independent local NGOs." Speaking from recent experience, the British participant explained that the Syrian crisis and the current ISIS context show that "holding back from work in peace initiatives" has been counter-productive to the goals of humanitarian actors. The lesson learned, he added, is that "focus should not be on development work only, but also on peace building."

For the American participant, in light of the increase in the number of violent conflicts in recent years, donor fatigue in the USA is a factor that should not be ignored. There is therefore, he believed, a need to create a "new narrative about peace building without calling it so." In this regard, a representative of a Finnish faith-based humanitarian organization explained how they sought to bridge the gap between humanitarian work and peace mediation by addressing basic needs (education projects) as a means for conflict prevention. Another example of their effort was supporting the role of religious

and traditional leaders in Somalia, based on Somali elders' wish to contribute to national peace and state building processes coupled with the facilitation of dialogue and communication between communities (often represented by the religious leaders & traditional leaders) and the State (weak, biased) and the International Community led by United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS). The local community dialogue initiative served in a later stage as a foundation for a national dialogue. The Finnish participant echoed other participants in explaining that duplication of efforts and competition remain serious challenges in the field, which calls for more dialogue and cooperation among humanitarian actors and peace mediators.

---

#### SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND MEDIATION

The exchange among this small group identified three challenges for humanitarian NGOs working in conflict contexts. First, there is a lack of trust, and hence poor cooperation, between Western and Islamic humanitarian organizations in the field. Second, there is sensitivity among humanitarian NGOs to politics and peace actors. Third, the lack of an institutional framework for the articulation of humanitarian action and conflict transformation. The group came up with recommendations in order to deal with the above challenges. These included launching joint initiatives among multiple Islamic and Western organizations in order to build trust and exchange experiences where humanitarian action intersects with conflict transformation. For these joint projects to succeed they should be designed in a way that respects local cultures and does not meddle in politics, and that they are implemented by local partner NGOs. This effort would also require building the



capacities of the humanitarian NGOs in the field of conflict resolution.

### III. INTER-COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN MALI

The conflict in Mali between the government in Bamako and armed groups in northern Mali was discussed from the perspectives of diverse local community religious and traditional leaders in Bamako and the three territories of north Mali (Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu). A notable Malian religious scholar explained that the High Islamic Council (HIC) in Bamako had decided to remain neutral since the outbreak of the conflict in 2012. That neutral position, according to the scholar, allowed the HIC to play a role in collecting and delivering humanitarian aid to the conflict zone in north Mali. The role of the HIC was not limited to humanitarian aid only but also used the acceptance it enjoyed by all parties to conflict to play a mediation role. Thus, the HIC took the initiative of sending a delegation to meet with Blaise Compaoré, former president of Burkina Faso, as well as other regional organizations. This Malian scholar thought that past north Mali / Azawad rebellions did not project a religious dimension. Religion has been very central in the 2012 conflict, however. This shift in the factors underpinning the north Mali / Azawad rebellion called for the HIC to play a role in finding a peaceful solution while maintaining its neutrality.

It was interesting to see that not all three northern Mali / Azawad participants from Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu agreed on the extent to which the 2012 rebellion was underpinned by religion. For a Sufi scholar from Gao, while the conservative nature of the north Mali / Azawad territory is well known throughout history, to the point that “France likened its colonization of Timbuktu

in 1848 to the fall of Granada,” still not all northern Mali / Azawad tribes care about religion. Hence, not all the rebellion is religiously motivated. The Sufi scholar thought that other factors, such as the underdevelopment of the north and marginalization from power sharing, account more for the reasons leading to the rebellion. There is no denial that “the 2012 war added a religious dimension,” but the conflict is not all about religion, concluded the Sufi participant from Gao. A figure from an influential tribe in Kidal did not entirely agree. For this young religious figure, before the French colonization of the north Mali / Azawad territory there were sultanates ruled according to the Islamic teachings, and “at the independence there was an agreement that the administration in the south (Bamako) would respect the Islamic legislation in the north given the conservative nature of region.” The Kidal participant believed that the imposition of the French administrative model by Bamako on the north Mali / Azawad tribes had led to armed conflict since independence. According to this Tuareg participant the forced implementation of the French model education system in Kidal, where tribes are very conservative, resulted in those tribes’ decision not to send their children to state-run schools, where Arabic and Islam are not taught. “Bamako’s refusal to recognize the cultural and administrative independence of the Azawad led to rebellion and demands for secession or autonomous rule,” the Kidal participant concluded.

A third northern Mali / Azawad participant from Timbuktu thought that the Malian government’s indiscriminate treatment of the various groups in north Mali / Azawad fueled the conflict and underscored its religious dimension. Bamako’s treatment of the Daawa wa Tabligh Salafi group that focuses on preaching and does not meddle in politics, was a stark example. The Timbuktu

participant explained that the Malian army had killed many preachers of the Tabligh group, which was classified as a terrorist organization by Bamako. All four Malian participants agreed that power and wealth sharing issues are at the heart of the Malian conflict; but there is also the issue of justice. "True reconciliation requires justice. This is the lesson from the past peace agreements of 1991 and 2006," asserted a participant from Kidal. A Malian affairs expert picked up on the issue of justice and reconciliation, and explained that the 2012 conflict was, in a way, the result of the lack of justice following the conflicts of 1963, 1990 and 2006. This expert believed that imposing reconciliation without justice is simply a recipe for another round of conflict.

The peace process that is underway in Algiers was then raised. A Malian scholar regretted that the HIC had not been invited to the negotiations, and thought that a durable peace in Mali would require the role of religious leaders. According to the Malian expert, the religious question is not integrated in the Algiers negotiations. The Malian affairs expert thought that, "if religious and political root causes are not addressed then that would lead to radicalization." This assumption was echoed by the Sufi scholar from Gao who called for the need to "revive the role of religious leaders in the region because they retain local knowledge, understanding of context, dialects, and credibility." Participants discussed the dialogue initiatives that were launched by different stakeholders in Mali. For the Malian expert, if those initiatives have failed to have any meaningful impact on the course of the conflict, then that is because of three main reasons. First, religious leaders in the north and south are stigmatized and excluded from the peace initiatives. Second, the inter-community dialogues that were launched ignored northern Mali, leading to

the rejection of the inter-community dialogue by refugees from the north. Third, peace actors concentrate their work in Bamako and tend to ignore the conflict stakeholders in the north. Participants added other factors that fuel the conflict such as the power shift and internal tension created by drug-trafficking and the geopolitics of the Sahel's natural resources.

The Malian affairs analyst thought that in addition to the stigmatization of the religious leaders and the power shifts among the armed Azawad groups there are two other aspects of the Malian conflict that should be taken into account in designing a peace process. The analyst believed that the representation of the central government in the Azawad north, and the survival of the cultural markers and identity of the state are at the heart of the conflict between Bamako and the north Mali / Azawad communities.

#### IV. THE BOKO HARAM QUESTION

Two Nigerians, an Imam and a Catholic priest, presented different perspectives on the Boko Haram group and the conflict in northern Nigeria. Despite their different religious convictions, the two participants are involved in a joint peace initiative at community level in order to reconcile the Muslim and Christian communities and promote co-habitation. The Boko Haram issue is indeed a matter of perspective. Beyond the condemnation of the loss of innocent lives and readily sensational media headlines is a need for careful and deep deconstruction of the issue. Participants presented at least four different perspectives on the Boko Haram group. First, there is the Christian perspective about Boko Haram, who look at it as aiming to eliminate Christians and implement Sharia in Nigeria. Some Muslims, however, think that

Christians orchestrate Boko Haram in order to tarnish the image of Muslims. Third, there is the Nigerian PDP ruling party that suspects that Muslim leaders of the opposition party orchestrate Boko Haram. Fourth, there is the perspective of the Muslim opposition party that views Boko Haram as a group orchestrated by the ruling party in order to weaken the opposition. They think that the ruling party's aim is to create instability in order that the 2015 elections would not take place. They see the concentration of the Boko Haram attacks only in constituencies loyal to the opposition as a further proof of this ruling party strategy.

Some might dismiss some or all of these perspectives as conspiracy theories or simplistic readings of the Boko Haram issue, but a Nigerian participant insisted that getting to the bottom of each and every one of those perceptions is a prerequisite to any conflict analysis effort, let alone resolving the conflict. The task, both Nigerian participants agreed, is made more difficult by the fact that there is a huge lack in terms of facts and data about the Boko Haram group. Indeed, rigorous research is needed in order to understand the movement, how it networks, recruits, trains, etc. Other regional and international factors complicate the task further. Accusations of the Chadian regime and the US of playing unhealthy roles in the Nigerian conflict are all factors fueling the conspiracy theories fed to the public.

For the Nigerian priest, there is no denial that because of historical reasons there is less development in the north, but victims of that injustice "should not address that injustice by more injustice on innocents." The Nigerian Imam believed that four elements have fueled the Boko Haram conflict. He summed these factors as need in people, greed of politicians, creed, an information vacuum and lack of dialogue between Muslims and

Christians. Participants from other Sahel countries explained that there is indeed a huge lack of understanding of the conflict in northern Nigeria given the complexity of the crisis and the interaction of historical, religious and political dimensions in the conflict. Mauritanian and Malian scholars stressed the importance of the role of religious scholars and their legitimacy as leaders in contributing to mediation efforts. The Nigerian priest added, "There is gain when religious and traditional leaders are involved. Loss when excluded." This is, however, not without a price. Sheikh Jafaar Ben Ahmed, who reportedly confronted Boko Haram, was killed in 2007.

The session concluded with agreement that there is a need for a continued interfaith dialogue in order to address the information vacuum. "Communities should understand that there is room for understanding the other community's faith without comprising one's beliefs," the Imam commented. Second, there is huge lack of serious and deep research on the Boko Haram group. Third, religious scholars should be encouraged to play a more significant role as peace mediators. Fourth, youth should be empowered at the grassroots level in communities, schools, universities, etc. All this effort requires technical support in planning and implementing programs for conflict transformation. Some Christian mediation actors play a role in this regard, but their acceptance is limited in the Muslim majority north Nigeria. According to a Finnish participant, there is a need for interfaith cooperation and joint efforts by peacebuilding and faith-based organisations, working together through such structures as provided by e.g. the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.

---

#### SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON THE BOKO HARAM GROUP

In the light of the local knowledge shared by the two Nigerian participants it was clear that there is a huge lack of knowledge outside

Nigeria about the nature, motivation, organization, and mobilization strategy of the Boko Haram armed group and its conflict with the Nigerian government. The small group recommended conducting a collaborative research by one or more experts in faith-based armed groups in the Sahel. The findings of the field research would then serve as a basis for a panel of experts and conflict transformation practitioners to recommend a strategy for promoting peace in Nigeria.

#### V. PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE: THE 2010 PRISON DIALOGUE INITIATIVE IN MAURITANIA

The Mauritanian experience in the prevention of violence was discussed with two of the main scholars who led the 2010 dialogue initiative with Salafi prisoners. The two scholars explained that the discourse of the global war on terror in the wake of 9/11 was translated, by the regimes in the Sahel region, into a campaign of repression and persecution of Salafi youth. In Mauritania, the imprisonment of figures and scholars of the Salafi current in the aftermath of the 2005 coup removed a key element of the safety net that the Salafi figures had put in place since 2002 to counter armed groups recruiting Mauritanian youth. A Mauritanian expert on the affairs of armed groups in the Sahel confirmed that there is a correlation between the imprisonment of the Salafi scholars in 2005 and the increase in the number of Mauritanian Salafi recruits in armed groups in neighbouring Mali and Algeria.

After the 2008 coup, the crackdown on Salafi activity was relaxed, which set the ground for a government-sponsored dialogue initiative with Salafi prisoners in 2010. It was in this context that the Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz government convened a delegation of

Mauritanian religious scholars, including Salafi ones that were released after two years in prison, to conduct a series of debates with the Salafi prisoners. The two scholars who took part in the dialogue initiative explained that after the initial PR setting (televised session, large delegation of scholars, large media coverage, etc.) in which the government publicized the initiative, the government was brought to understand that, for such a dialogue to bear fruit, a much more modest approach should be adopted. The dialogue then resumed with a much smaller group of three scholars who are credible among Salafi Jihadis, not only in Mauritania, but also throughout the Sahel and MENA regions. Reflecting on the lessons learned from the 2010 dialogue initiative that led to the release of around 50 Salafi prisoners, three Mauritanian scholars emphasized the following:

- Local scholars, who are credible in the eyes of Jihadi groups and very versed in the doctrinal arguments that the armed groups use to justify violence, should conduct the dialogue.
- Fairness: Scholars who lead the dialogue should support the views held by Salafi prisoners when they themselves (the scholars) agree with, even if they are considered extreme or terrorist views by the government.
- The importance of measures for following up to ensure the legal, social and economic integration framework for the prisoners released.
- Impartiality: Scholars who lead such a dialogue initiative should not be of a doctrinal affiliation that is in disagreement with the Jihadis.
- Government guarantees and support for the dialogue process.

- Encouraging political participation of Salafi groups has served as a means for some released Salafi prisoners to contribute to the construction of society through peaceful political means.

The success of the 2010 dialogue initiative in Mauritania had a notable impact on stability. “There has been a marked halt in attacks on government targets and tourists, as well as of Salafi Mauritanian youth joining armed groups in Mali after 2010, until the Serval French military intervention in 2013”, observed an expert.

A Malian affairs expert added that the indiscriminate manner in dealing with armed groups and considering them as all the same leads to extremism. Likewise, the exclusion of some armed groups from political processes (like negotiations) pushes those groups to look for other alternatives, including violent extremism. In this regard, a Tunisian analyst cautioned against generalized terms and the “one-description-fits-all” tendency in dealing with violent extremism. He insisted that locally-coined terms should be used to describe and analyze these groups. For instance, he believes that the types of engagement in violence in the region are three-fold: those who consider it their duty to come to the help of the oppressed; those who resort to violence because of a perceived injustice; and thirdly those manipulated by intelligence services. On the other hand, a Yemeni participant explained that religious or doctrinal conviction is not the only key motivation for engaging in violence. He explained that in Yemen the *Madkhali* Salafis traditionally cared only about religious learning and teaching in their own traditional schools. They did not even engage in charity work, let alone politics. However, the emergence of the Houthi group and the violence it perpetrated on those Salafi scholars and their towns is pushing some

segments of *Madkhali* Salafis to engage in violence. That is the justification element. The Yemeni participant believes that because the tendency to violence in that case is circumstantial and not doctrinal, then it is less difficult to convince them of the inefficacy of violence in resolving the conflict with Houthis.

## VI. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHABITATION IN THE REGION

Tensions and conflicts in the MENA region are not only among faith-based actors but also on issues related to the ethnic, linguistic, social and territorial diversity of the region. The Amazigh ethnic group is a key component of the North African countries. Egypt and Yemen comprise Sunnis, Shi’a and Copts, while Mauritania comprises Arabs, Black Africans, and Amazigh groups. Tensions arise around the issues of power-sharing, distribution of wealth and the recognition of a diverse citizenship. The intersection of one or more of these factors with historical perceived injustices, post-independence state building choices, and the present acute political, economic and development changes all contribute to a climate of tension and instability in some countries. The threat to national unity is real. Given the transversal nature of the ethnic and tribal build-up of societies of the region, the risk of a spill-over of such conflicts should not be under-estimated.

While efforts to repair the damage done to the social fabric of the region over centuries cannot arguably address all the perceived injustices in a few years, new and pressing challenges since 2011 call for urgent action in order to proactively address those tensions. A Mauritanian Sahel expert observed that the



legacy of dictatorship lives on years after the authoritarian regimes were toppled. He added that the region should place its bets on “democracy for it guarantees the establishment of a citizenship space where diversity and the rights of minorities are protected.” A Mauritanian scholar, however, thought that Islam is the common factor that holds together the regional societies’ fabric. Not all participants however, shared this view. Some point to failed states such as Somalia where, while Islam is the common religion, it did not save the country from falling apart. Libya and Mali are two examples that could be cited as well. As another Mauritanian expert explained, “the management of racial and ethnic diversity becomes more complicated when the issue exits the social field and becomes a political factor.” A Moroccan activist explained that it was for that reason that the Amazigh community, though a numerical majority considered a political minority, focused its efforts on advocating for the recognition of the Amazigh community within the framework of citizenship, international law and treaties to which had ratified and Morocco adhered to. Given the existence of Amazighs in Libya, the session was an opportunity to exchange experiences on lessons learned from the handling of the ethnic identity demands for the recognition of their citizenship rights. A Libyan female participant presented the ethnic diversity of Libya and the complexity of its social fabric given the role of the tribe in Libyan society. Tribal ties and solidarity pacts often transcend ethnic boundaries.

The role of the tribe in the societies of some countries of the region such as Libya and Yemen gives a de facto important role in the management of relations that underpin the stability of those societies. That role can go, in some cases, beyond the political borders of the country if the tribe stretches to

neighboring countries, as is the case in some Sahel countries such as Tuareg tribes in Mali, Niger, and Algeria. In some instances, traditional tribal leaders play a dual role in their capacity as tribal notable on one hand, and religious leader of the community on the other hand. This is notably the case in Mali, Libya, and Yemen. In Libya, the members of the tribal council of the wise men are also members of the Fatwa council and Imams of mosques. Participants from Libya and Mali shared experiences of their own mediation and peace initiatives in the last three years. A Malian scholar explained the decisive role the Islamic council played in negotiations with armed groups, and which led to the release of around 500 Malian prisoners of war, and the channeling of humanitarian aid to Gao, in Mali. Another example of the role of traditional and religious leaders in peace processes is the participation of around 170 notable leaders in the Malian peace negotiations in Algiers in 2014. A Libyan participant explained how the local council of Misrata mediated a ceasefire between the Tebou and Oulad Suleiman communities in Sebha.

Another participant thought that while traditional and religious leaders have played a key role in appeasing tensions at the local and national levels, the ad hoc nature of their effort limits the sustainability of the impact of their interventions. While these leaders are organized in local or national community councils of wise men, the absence of an institutional structure that harnesses the individual efforts of different councils and leaders is a handicap for the sustainability of their initiatives. Recent experiences show that those leaders are often only invited to play a role at the peak of the violent tensions. In other words, “they act as firemen to put out fires rather than institutions for prevention of violence and promotion of social cohesion,” a Libyan analyst

commented. A second reason that is undermining the role of traditional and religious leaders is the emergence of the new rich and businessmen to the detriment of the traditional community leaders.

#### SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY ON DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHABITATION

This small group, that comprised participants from Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, identified three pressing issues that pose challenges to the social cohesion of some societies of the MENA: respecting linguistic diversity, the political participation of minorities, and full citizenship rights. Examples of these include the struggle of the Amazigh for the recognition of Tamazight as an official language, the recognition of Libyan Amazigh identity in the draft constitution, and the issue of granting citizenship to Tebou communities in the south of Libya. In Mauritania, there is the issue of polarization between Arabs and Black Africans on matters of citizenship, power and wealth sharing. This diverse group recommended launching dialogue spaces between actors and other stakeholders with interests in those three issues with the aim of adopting a charter that guarantees respect of linguistic diversity and the establishment of transparent criteria for the implementation of the laws regulating the granting of citizenship and nationality.

#### VII. PARTNERSHIPS AND SYNERGY BETWEEN MUSLIM AND WESTERN PEACE ACTORS

Like the ethnic and linguistic landscape of the region, the religious one is diverse as well. The presence of Christians in Muslim societies of the MENA and Sahel regions has called for the intervention of Western Christian humanitarian and peace NGOs to operate in these countries. The increase in

sectarian tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in recent years has brought Western Christian humanitarian NGOs to expand their role to peace mediation. A representative of a Finnish organization shared the NGOs' experience in this regard. In the wake of the 2011 political upheaval in the MENA region, and its consequences on the Sub-Saharan region, The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was initiated as a collaborative effort between a Finnish humanitarian agency and the UN Mediation Support Unit in the Department of Political Affairs (UN MSU – DPA), the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Religions for Peace (RfP) in 2013. The initiative was a response to the growing awareness among mediation actors and peacebuilding organizations, including the UN, that religious and traditional leaders are an influential yet underutilized resource in peace and peacebuilding processes. The Network's mission is to "to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of mediation efforts through strengthening local ownership and supporting the positive role of religious and traditional leaders in mediation." Given the global nature of the tensions in the region, Network members include a variety of peacebuilding organisations, faith-based organisations and research institutions. In addition to supporting local peace actors through research, training, and building connections between local initiatives and global organizations such as the UN, the global network aims to avoid the duplication of efforts by supporting better collaboration and synergies.

An American participant shared the experience of his peace organization in building partnerships with non-Western Muslim organizations in Asia. The American participant thought some tensions and



conflict have taken a global dimension. The response should then be global while taking account local and regional specifications. Developing peace initiatives with a durable impact would then require establishing partnerships between Western peace actors and their counterparts in the region. According to the American analyst, terrorism, being one of the pressing issues on the agenda of government, imposes on peace actors the need to develop a strategy that “speaks the language of governments, while resisting the tendency to be branded as counter-terrorism” tools or mechanisms. This requires devising a strategy and a structure. Since it takes time to “change perceptions, it is then vital to focus on education in order to change mind-sets in order to change behavior eventually,” the American expert concluded. Participants from the MENA region thought that partnership with Western organizations is necessary but it should be built on solid foundation. A Mauritanian scholar thought that issues of disagreement between Muslims and the West, such as the aggression on some Muslim countries, ought to be addressed in a frank way. A Tunisian analyst added that collaboration between the West and the Muslim world for the prevention of violence should advance on two tracks. On one hand, there is a need to restrain the youth who engage in violence in the Muslim world; while the West should, on the other hand, review its discourse of the “war on terror” and all the legal and military mechanisms that go with it. A Mauritanian Sahel expert concluded by stressing the need to focus on education, media and continuous dialogue spaces in launching violence prevention initiatives.

#### VIII. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE AND THE DOCTRINAL ARGUMENTS FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The success of non-violent action in effecting political change in some MENA countries in 2011 has re-ignited the doctrinal religious debate about political participation and non-partisan action as both valid and effective alternatives to violence. The success of some faith-based political actors in winning majority seats in the constituent assemblies of Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, and the creation of the Salafi Al Nour party in Egypt motivated other Salafi movements to set up political parties with a religious reference in not only the “Arab Spring” countries, but also in Mauritania. The setbacks of the political transition in some countries such as Yemen and Libya, and the ousting of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt are factors that underpin the doctrinal debate about the religious validity and effectiveness of political participation. Scholars, who disapprove of political participation based on the inefficacy of political action in effecting change, have found in those setbacks a justification for their position. Those who oppose political participation based on doctrinal interpretations that consider partisan action to be religiously illicit have found in the chaos of transition in some “Arab Spring” countries a validation for the relevance of their position against partisan and non-partisan political action by faith-based groups. Proponents of violent extremism use this doctrinal debate to justify the violent action.

A Yemeni participant added psychological and material factors in addition to doctrinal and intellectual ones, which all contribute to distancing some faith-based groups from political action. Some religious figures and groups are in favor of political participation,

but refrain from taking that step due to fear of public perception as respected figures of the society. There are also some material factors. Faith-based groups have spent decades in charity and preaching work. They have developed skills, networks, and assets that are necessary of that field of action but not for political participation. Mindful that they lack skills in media, economics, political organization, etc., which are prerequisites for success in political participation, those faith-inspired groups tend to avoid partisan politics. Funding is a key factor, the Yemeni participant concluded. There is funding for charity and preaching work but not for political action. Faith-based groups who are willing to engage in politics are therefore at the mercy of donors.

A Mauritanian participant explained that the intellectual works of some scholars who have ruled against political participation influence some of those donors. Some of these scholars have produced their books at the demand of authoritarian regimes. Hence, there is a huge work to be done in order to counter authoritarian regimes in the field of intellectual work to promote the political participation of faith-based groups. A Moroccan scholar concluded by saying that all notable scholars of Islamic thought are in favor of political participation in the wider sense (partisan and non-partisan). Those who are against it on religious doctrinal argument are not scholarly authorities in the field. Nevertheless, the means put at their service by authoritarian regimes in order to spread their thought on a large-scale (publishing houses, satellite TV channels, radios, public events, etc.) give a louder

resonance to their flawed doctrinal interpretations.

What was said concerning the debate about the validity of political participation applies to the debate on the prevention of violence. Scholar participants from Morocco and Mauritania enumerated many verses that show the sacredness of human life in Islam. A Moroccan scholar explained that even in the case of justified wars to ward off aggression by non-Muslims, Islam has put guidelines covering the conduct of violent action, the treatment and rights of prisoners of war, women, innocents, public and private property, etc. Another notable Mauritanian scholar believed that he is convinced that there is a way to deal with violent groups such as Boko Haram through dialogue. This dialogue initiative would first explain the position of Islam with regard to violent action. Second, since all religiously inspired armed groups consider Al Qaeda as their inspiration and reference in Jihad, then there is a way to use this element as a counter-argument. This is possible by showing that Al Qaeda did adopt peaceful alternatives for change in its action. This pedagogic work could be done by producing research based on Al Qaeda documents that have become available recently, as well as first hand testimonies. A research work produced on these terms would have credibility in the eyes of violent Jihadi groups. Secondly, it would demonstrate that Al Qaeda did include peaceful action in its agenda (non-partisan engagement in the public sphere), and that it was restrictions in that engagement that pushed it to violent action.

## IX. OUTCOMES / RESULTS

The workshop set two main objectives to achieve strengthening conflict transformation skills and the exchange of experiences among participants and networks in the MENA/Sahel regions, and between those regions and the West. Second, the workshop aimed to identify practical peace initiatives that participants or their networks could effectively launch.

1. **Enhance participants' capacities in conflict transformation** by providing them with the basics of conflict analysis and conflict transformation (tools, approaches): the analyses of the conflicts in Mali and Nigeria enhanced participants' knowledge on the different tools of conflict analysis, especially Conflict Mapping, Timeline, Stages of the Conflict, and Positions-Interests-Needs. Furthermore, through the presentations and the small group activities, especially the articulation of humanitarian work and conflict transformation, as well as the Mali dialogue space, participants gained knowledge on conflict transformation approaches, particularly diapraxis and mediation space. Finally, the do-no-harm principle in conflict transformation was addressed in the discussions on the prevention of violence.
2. Strengthening peace promotion initiatives in the regions and networks by **encouraging - experience sharing amongst participants** and providing expertise from external experts in conflict transformation: With six sessions featuring participants with diverse backgrounds (Amazigh, Tuareg, Musilm, Christian, women, Salafi, humanitarian NGOs, traditional leaders, religious scholars, and political affairs analysts) the workshop offered opportunities for a rich exchange and sharing of experiences. It also contributed to a deep understanding of the dynamics of conflicts in the region and avenues for peace promotion initiatives. Participants praised the diversified content of the workshop and quality of participants. The session on Mali was of particular interest to all participants.

**Identifying of peace initiatives** in the region: Participants identified five areas of action on issues ranging from peace mediation in humanitarian work, to ethnic tensions in Morocco and Mali; and countering violent extremism. Next steps to be taken in this regard are detailed below.

## X. NEXT STEPS

The following concrete steps were agreed at the closing session of the workshop.

1. Humanitarian organizations dialogue: Three humanitarian organizations agreed to coordinate with the aim of promoting peace through the cooperation of NGOs and humanitarian action.
2. Amazigh-Islamist dialogue in Morocco: Participants representing Islamist groups and Amazigh NGOs agreed to the holding of a dialogue space in order to lessen polarization in the public sphere between the Amazigh and Islamists.
3. Inter-community dialogue in Mali: Malian participants acknowledged the need for an inter-community dialogue in order to promote peace on a durable basis.
4. Boko Haram research: in order to fully understand the phenomenon and cover lines of tension (Christian/Muslim; North/South etc.) participants agreed there is a need for an expert to conduct an action research paper on religiously inspired armed groups in the Sahel.

Salafi scholars are willing to engage in doctrinal discussions focusing on countering the discourse of violence. This pedagogical work requires producing research, a seminar, and publications. For such an endeavor to have an impact among violent religiously extremist groups the scholars should be fully independent and locally sponsored.